

(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) A Child of the Century: Washington Wong

(U) NSA over the decades has employed countless first-class linguists with a wealth of experience, but, arguably, none had deeper or more varied experiences than Washington Wong. He didn't just live through turbulent times; he himself was caught up in many of the movements and events that roiled Asia in the twentieth century.

(U) "Wash," as he preferred to be called, was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on a particular president's birthday in 1928. Wash's father was Chinese, his mother Japanese, so he grew up speaking both languages. His grandfather was also Hawaiian-born, but he had business interests in China and took his family to Shanghai when Wash was a toddler. His two sisters were born there.

(U) In 1937, when Japanese forces provoked war with China, the father returned to Hawaii, expecting to bring his family back to the States shortly, and the rest of the Wong family quickly moved to the city of Canton (now Guangdong) to await their passage to the United States. When a friend with connections tipped them off that Chinese authorities intended to arrest Wash's mother as an enemy alien, the family moved on to the Portuguese enclave of Macao. They lived -- and paid protection to local warlords -- from a small stock of gold pieces the grandfather had given them, which 12-year-old Wash wrapped in a belt around his waist. Wash's grandfather died as a result of the arduous travel to find a safe haven.

(U) During their escape to Macao, a Japanese Army officer learned that Wash's mother was bilingual in Japanese and Chinese. He employed her as an interpreter to help solve problems with local farmers; in gratitude for her assistance, he recommended her for a teaching position in Macao.

(U) After the end of World War II, Wash's father returned from Hawaii to take his family back to America. However, as Wash was the only family member born in the United States, he was the only one granted an exit visa. It took a couple of years, but finally the rest of the family was able to join them, thanks to the efforts of Hiram Fong, then a prominent Honolulu attorney, later a senator from the state.

(U) Back in Hawaii, Wash enrolled in high school and began to learn English. As he recalled, by 1951 he had "just learned enough English to get drafted." He took his basic

training at Schofield Barracks.

(U) Not surprisingly, since he was fluent in several Chinese dialects, Wash "maxed" the Army's Chinese language test and was taken into the Army Security Agency (ASA -- predecessor of INSCOM). Once his security clearance came through, he was shipped straight to Korea, where the U.S./UN forces were in combat against "volunteers" from the People's Liberation Army.

(U) In Korea, ASA assigned Wash as an intercept operator in the Low-Level Intercept Program. He carted a radio into the mountains along the main line of resistance and translated plain text intercepted from Chinese front-line communications. Wash occasionally was also called upon to interrogate prisoners. His sergeant for a time, by the way, was Walter Deeley, who later became an NSA employee himself.

~~(TS//SI)~~ At one point in the war, Wash was called on to assist in the interrogation of a People's Liberation Army cryptographer captured during combat. Because he spoke Chinese like a native, Wash became the "good cop" on the two-person interrogation team, and succeeded in drawing vital information from the prisoner.

~~(TS//SI)~~ When he left the service after 18 months in Korea, Wash was hired as a civilian by ASA, and assigned back to Japan in 1953. He worked as a cryptanalyst and translator of PRC intercept in Tokyo for several years, then was reassigned to Okinawa in 1957.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ In 1965, when ASA began phasing out billets for employees in East Asia, on the advice of friends he applied for a position at NSA. During his employment processing, he again passed the language examinations with highest marks. However, NSA's security organization recommended against hiring him because of his long-time residence in Asia and minimal time in the United States. (His actual time of residence in Hawaii had been short, and he had never set foot in the continental U.S. until 1952, when he escorted the important POW to the Washington area).

(U) But Wash Wong acquired an influential friend.

(U) While a civilian at grade GS-12 in Okinawa, Wash was assigned the job of escorting a visitor from NSA, a certain Milton Zaslow. Milt Zaslow was a GS-16, then the highest civilian grade, but the pre-visit planning message was inadvertently garbled, and Wash was told to arrange things for a GS-6. Figuring "I was twice as high rank as he was," Wash registered him for a billet in the sergeants' quarters. When Zaslow inquired if this arrangement was a joke, Wash told him that he could get the BOQ after his next promotion.

(U) Things straightened out quickly -- Zaslow was given generals' quarters and a hastily

scheduled courtesy call from the station chief. The next day, Sunday, Wash took his high-ranking visitor out for an Oriental meal and the two reconciled. Zaslow, in fact, had been a Chinese linguist in government service dating back to World War II, and he readily recognized Wash Wong's talents.

(U//FOUO) When the hiring problem became known to him, Zaslow signed a waiver, allowing NSA to bring Wash on board. Washington Wong came to NSA in 1967. Interviewed in 1993, Wash recalled that over the years he and Milt Zaslow became good friends -- "...I don't treat him like a GS-6, though."

-(TS//SI) At NSA, Wash became the stalwart of the PRC transcription shop; his native ability in Chinese enabled him to hear things missed by others, as well as differentiate among dialects and accents. He was also a superior cryptanalyst. Among his other duties, Wash served as an interpreter for the director during visits by high-ranking dignitaries from more than one Asian country. Finally, over the years, Wash mentored many Chinese linguists in both translation and transcription, developing working aids and training materials for them.

(U//FOUO) Washington Wong was the first "technical track" supergrade among Chinese linguists. In 1977 the Crypto-Linguistic Association gave Wash the Sydney Jaffe Award for outstanding contributions to language work at NSA. He was awarded the National Intelligence Distinguished Medal in 1990. Washington Wong retired from NSA in 1996.

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